

Plan Ahead for a Healthy Baby

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Every mother hopes and prays her baby will be born healthy. In the delivery room, we hold our breath until we've counted each little finger and each little toe. But much of your baby's health is in your hands. Planning ahead can help reduce your baby's risk of low birth weight and birth defects and ensure a healthier pregnancy for you and a healthier start to life for your child.

If you are thinking about becoming pregnant sometime in the future, or if you could become pregnant unexpectedly, start planning now.

Get a medical checkup before conceiving. During this pre-pregnancy visit, your health care provider will evaluate your health, identify any risks and guide you in making lifestyle changes, if necessary.

Know your family history. Tell your health care provider about any difficult pregnancies or birth defects in your family. If the problem is inherited or a genetic disorder, you might also consider speaking with a genetic counselor.

Talk to your health care provider about **beginning treatments for medical conditions** like diabetes, epilepsy and high blood pressure. Because these conditions can affect your pregnancy, it's a good idea to have them well under control *before* you get pregnant.

Adopt a healthy lifestyle. Get plenty of exercise and reduce stress. Avoid drinking, smoking or using drugs. Ask your health care provider if the prescription or over-the-counter medications you use are safe to take before becoming pregnant and during pregnancy.

Take 400 micrograms of **B vitamin folic acid** every day before and during early pregnancy to reduce the risk of certain birth defects of the brain and spine. Start now – it is a good idea for *all* women to take daily folic acid.

Eat a balanced diet. Healthy eating before pregnancy will help ensure that you get the nutrients needed by you and your baby when you do become pregnant. Experts also recommended you take a multivitamin or prenatal vitamin every day *before* pregnancy and continue taking a prenatal vitamin daily during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Talk to your health care provider about how you can safely **achieve your ideal weight**. If you're overweight when you become pregnant, you're more likely to develop high blood pressure and diabetes during pregnancy. If you're underweight, you're more likely to have a low birth weight baby.

If you are not immune to chickenpox and rubella, check with your health care provider about getting **vaccinated** before you conceive. These illnesses can cause birth defects if a woman gets them while she's pregnant.

Avoid exposure to toxic substances and chemicals. Such exposure at home or work by either you or your partner can make it more difficult to become pregnant and can harm the developing baby.

Don't eat undercooked meat or handle cat litter. They can cause an infection called toxoplasmosis, which can seriously harm a developing fetus. Avoid them even before you get pregnant.

By taking these simple steps now, you can help ensure a healthier start for the precious little infant you may hold in your arms someday in the future. ☺